

Inmate Watch Program Helps Prevent Suicides

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The Jefferson County Jail, located in Louisville, Kentucky, serves over 900,000 persons residing in the metropolitan area.

The average daily jail census is over 1,600 in five correctional facilities. The largest facility, with more than 600 beds, the Hall of Justice is the site of the inmate suicide prevention watch program. The goal of the program is to reduce the suicide risk among inmates in our facilities.

Screening Process

Suicide prevention on behalf of our inmates begins on the booking floor following the initial search of a new arrestee by a corrections officer. A nurse then administers a health screening form, including a suicide risk checklist with weighted point values. In addition, the nurse conducts a brief mental status examination. If the arrestee's responses to questions indicate that the individual is in acute psychological distress, the interviewer notifies the jail psychologist.

If an arrestee seems to present a suicide risk, the psychologist notifies the appropriate shift sergeant of the

need to place the individual in a single cell for precautionary observation. The degree of apparent risk influences the psychologist's recommendation for time intervals between observations. In addition, the psychologist is empowered to order that a highly suicidal individual be placed in a paper gown and not permitted to have items in the cell that might facilitate a suicide attempt.

An individual for whom precautionary measures have been recommended is then scheduled for an assessment by the psychologist or a psychiatric registered nurse. The results of this assessment will be used to make decisions about modifying the precautionary measures and about future residential placement.

If an individual has a recent history of psychiatric or psychological treatment, or poses an immediate risk of harm to him/her self or others, he or she is placed in a "pending psych" classification status. It is the responsibility of the psychologist to either corroborate that classification or assist staff in identifying an appropriate classification.

The jail's psychiatric unit is composed of two single-cell walks and two open walks. There is a total

of thirty-four cells on the psychiatric unit, which is reserved for those diagnosed as psychotic/chronically mentally ill.

Inmate Volunteers

The unusual aspect of Jefferson County's suicide prevention program is that it utilizes inmates to watch others for potentially suicidal behavior.

Inmates chosen for participation in the inmate suicide watch prevention program are volunteers. A selection panel comprised of the jail psychologist and members of the corrections staff, including a shift sergeant, choose the most appropriate inmates from a pool of volunteer candidates. Selection criteria include: a good

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jails disciplinary record; demonstrated maturity; emotional stability; and the individual's stated dedication to the goals and objectives of the program.

The shift sergeant maintains a list of approved inmate watchers. In the event that a member of an inmate watch team is unable to perform his duties, the vacancy is filled from this list.

Several key residential areas are monitored by watch teams deployed nightly on a rotating schedule. These areas are the psychiatric unit, the basement, three walks on the sixth floor, and the observation cells on the female residential unit. The members of an inmate watch team accompany corrections officers during their nightly security and observation checks, conducted in each of the targeted residential areas between the hours of 10:30 p.m. and 7:00 a.m.

Inmate watchers expand the ability of correctional officers to prevent suicides. Volunteers have been instructed by the corrections staff that they should immediately notify the officer on duty if they observe an inmate who appears to be in psychological distress. The corrections officer then assumes full responsibility for coordinating emergency or precautionary measures.

Jail psychologists provide inmate watchers with a two-hour orientation on basic mental health issues, including suicide and depression. In addition, corrections staff train the watchers on basic emergency responses.

Program Benefits

Inmate watchers are given the opportunity to promote the welfare of their peers. Teamwork, responsibility, compassion, and contribution are nurtured among volunteer inmate participants.

Jefferson County Correction's Inmate Suicide Watch Program has

successfully prevented a number of suicides in the jail. Several inmates have received letters of commendation from **correctional administrators for their prompt and responsible actions taken in a potentially life-endangering situation.**

Originally, the inmate suicide prevention watch program was developed only for the duration of the holiday season, between Thanksgiving and mid-January. As a result of its success, the program has since grown and expanded to operate year-round. It has become an integral component of the jail's mental health services delivery system.

For further information, contact Lt. Col. Mark Friedman, Jefferson County Corrections, 600 West Jefferson Street, Louisville, Kentucky, 40202; (502) 588-2184. ■

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